

Community Empowerment through Establishment of a Local Food Supply Chain

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Introduction

The socio-economic crisis and its consequences in the “Post-austerity” era in Greece have increased the number of homeless and unemployed people (ATHENS RESILIENCE STRATEGY 2017: p. 12). The increasing number of vulnerable people in Athens are not capable of providing healthy food and require social support to adapt to the new living conditions. This study project seeks to cope with the economic crisis and the challenges that threaten the most vulnerable groups of the society by improving their socio-economic resilience via creating and promoting an alternative self-sustaining local food supply chain. Exarcheia neighborhood in the inner city of Athens is chosen as the case study of this project.

This study suggests a network of activities and places in Exarcheia neighborhood, in which urban gardens and farms are built and farmer’s markets and collective kitchens are organized. This network of places and people are supposed be managed by grass-roots initiatives with a special focus on empowering and supporting vulnerable groups of people in Exarcheia. The effect of such local food supply chain is reducing the expenses of food production and supply by omitting the middlemen, gaining affordable and healthy food and increasing the social capital in the neighborhood by boosting the interaction of different groups of inhabitants in the neighborhood and finally improving the quality of life of the inhabitants.

The present project was initiated in the course of a one-week summer school in Athens in June 2018, which made the cooperation of the co-authors possible. In the initial phase, a field survey in Exarcheia neighborhood and data collection was carried out to recognize the current situation and come up with ideas for its improvement. The final results of this study project include an analysis of the socio economic and spatial structure of Exarcheia neighborhood and elaborated strategies and measures for the implementation of a local food supply chain.

***Definition and
Functions of
the Local Food
Supply Chain***

Local food supply chain is a term used for describing the process of cultivating and handling foodstuff in the place of the residence of a community. This process can be viewed and organized at the national, regional or neighborhood policy levels (NIKOLAÏDOU et al. 2014). Local food supply chain in the present study is redefined to fit the neighborhood scale and particularly the densely built-up areas like Exarcheia neighborhood. Based on this context-specific definition, local food supply chain includes cultivating food-stuff in the urban gardens, selling them in the local farmer's markets and preparing the food in the collective kitchens.

Establishment of a Local food supply chain is beneficial in terms of providing healthy and affordable food. It is also claimed that local food production and seasonal food diets are ecologically more sustainable (FEENSTRA 1997). Another advantage of the establishment of a local food supply chain is the increase of social capital within the neighborhood's inhabitants. In this regard social capital is considered as a collective asset that grants members social "credits", which are used as capital to facilitate purposive actions (GLOVER 2004). "In many places a logical and appropriate way to revitalize a community is development of a local food economy" (NIKOLAÏDOU et al. 2014). It is a way to manage and revitalize vacant open space while still giving citizens - through a consensus-oriented approach to urban planning and governance- the right to re-use the public space (ibid.: p. 28). Another benefit of local food production through urban gardening is co-creating aesthetic values and green landscape in the densely built-up inner city area

It should be noted that one of the weaknesses of such alternative food supply chains is in the long-term viability of the projects and their integration in planning practices, especially when there is reluctance to designate urban gardening as a special land use in zoning plans and other planning documents (NIKOLAÏDOU et al. 2014)

In Europe, local authorities have only recently discovered community gardens and often see them as an efficient way to create community dynamics (ERNWEIN, 2014: 78). “The practices of so-called urban gardening range from illegal gardening of vacant space, to gardening in individual allotments and in community gardens” (ibid.). In Greece too, there is a boom of urban gardens that is concerned with the solidarity economy and results from the need to cope social and economic external threats such as layoffs and unemployment, loss of social security and welfare, neo-poverty, stress and loss of self-esteem (ANTHOPOULOU & PARTALIDOU 2015).

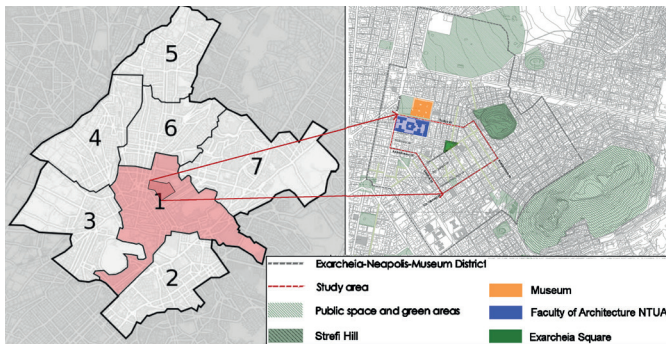


Fig. 1. The location of the study area in Athens Municipality. Source: Own depiction based on WIKIPEDIA 2015, LUH & NTUA 2018.

Exarcheia is a neighborhood in “District 1” of the Athens municipality. It is located in the inner city of Athens and is one of the oldest districts of the city. Exarcheia neighborhood is home to the National Technical University of Athens (NTUA) and the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, as the two most notable monumental landmarks and Exarcheia Square and Strefi Hill as the two most popular open spaces. The study area in this project, however, was limited to a part of Exarcheia neighborhood excluding the Archeological Museum and the Strefi Hill (see Fig. 1).

Analysis of the Socio-economic Situation and Spatial Structure in Exarcheia Neighborhood

The social structure of the district is characterized by high unemployment rate (GREEK STATISTICAL AUTHORITY 2011) (see Fig. 2). The share of families with children living in the district is low and the share of elderly from the whole population is relatively high (GREEK STATISTICAL AUTHORITY 2011) (see Fig. 3). Homelessness and drug dealing are evident in the public spaces of Exarcheia. All these conditions prove that a high share of inhabitants of Exarcheia are in a relatively vulnerable situation and need support in some way to adapt to the challenges of social and economic crisis. However, high share of students and young adults in the district, high number of grass-roots initiatives and existence of an alternative atmosphere and solidarity movements, is a valuable social asset and a great benefit for the neighborhood.

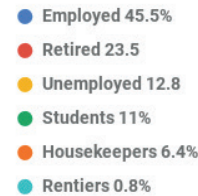


Fig. 2. Working status in Exarcheia. Source: GREEK STATISTICAL AUTHORITY 2011

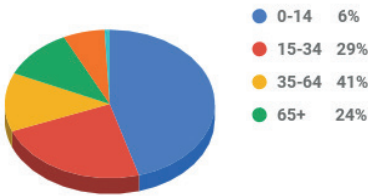


Fig. 3. Age groups status in Exarcheia. Source: GREEK STATISTICAL AUTHORITY 2011

The existing built environment in Exarcheia can be analyzed based on three categories of public, semi-public and private spaces. The diverse public open spaces, namely parks, plazas and pedestrian streets in Exarcheia are common hangouts where plenty of social interactions occur, thus providing a high potential to be used as spaces for communal activities such as gardening and trading food-stuff. Moreover, Exarcheia neighborhood possesses significant semi-public spaces with a high potential to be used for urban gardening. One of the suitable locations is the surrounding space of Faculty of Architecture of the National Technical University of Athens (see Fig. 4). The Architecture School and the social activities that occur in it attract diverse people to the area and have a large sphere of influence on the neighborhood. Furthermore, private spaces and buildings can be used for cultivating, selling and preparing food-stuff. There are also plenty of private properties like abandoned buildings and empty lots as well as the rooftops, inner courts or the balconies of the in-use houses and residential apartments

that are potential candidates for urban gardening.

The proposed local food supply chain in Exarcheia is analyzed as a process consisting of two main sectors namely urban gardening and food supply. The community gardening sector focuses on the cultivation of food, like fruits and vegetables by the residents of Exarcheia whether in the public and semi-public spaces, or in the shared spaces in private apartments, or even in the individual houses. The food supply sector consists of alternative farmer's markets and collective kitchens which are organized by the grass-roots initiatives and NGOs initiated by the local community.

This model for local food supply chain is not totally new to the Exarcheia community. Existing example in the field of urban gardening is the Navarinou park (see Fig. 4), a former parking lot which was supposed to be built upon, but the construction was banned by resistance of the citizens and the parking lot was transformed into an autonomous park and urban garden. Furthermore, in the food supply sector there is a farmer's market, called "Kallidromiou Laiki"¹ in Greek, that takes place every Saturday. Another more local public market is operating twice a month in the Exarcheia square. There is also a collective kitchen called "El-Chef" that is established by a grass-roots initiative and supports immigrants. It is located in Tsamadou pedestrian street near the Exarcheia square (see Fig. 4). Food is prepared there every Saturday, and anyone willing to volunteer in the process is welcome to do so. The kitchen's organization is based on volunteering, solidarity and taking initiatives to overcome everyday issues that come up due to the effects of the economic depression. Their other programs include free Greek classes, legal and social support for the refugees and immigrants and free computer classes. During evenings and weekends there is also a coffee shop ("kafenio") operating in the premise as a gathering point (EL-CHEF 2018).

In conclusion, the analysis of the social structure and the public spaces show that Exarcheia neighborhood has a strong image

¹Street market known in every village, town or city in Greece, held at least once a week. It sells vegetables and fruits from local farmers or middlemen who deal with the local farmers, but you will also find products such as eggs, fish, herbs as well as clothing and other household goods (LAIKICUISINE, n.d.).

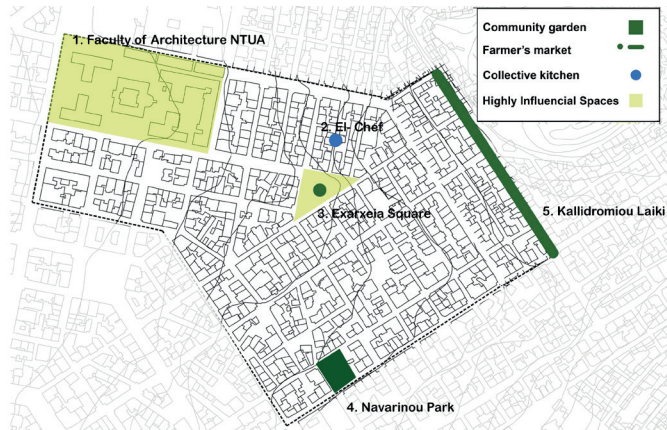


Fig. 4. Existing examples of alternative food supply chain in Exarcheia neighborhood. Source: Own depiction based on LUH & NTUA 2018

and potential to influence the nearby neighborhoods and encourage more bottom-up initiatives and actions also regarding local food supply chain. Moreover, since there are plenty of underused public and semi-public spaces and private buildings, there is the possibility of developing a network of urban gardens that are used for local food production.

**Strategies,
Policies and
Programs for
Developing
a Local Food
Supply Chain in
Exarcheia**

The overall strategy to implement our proposed local food supply chain in Exarcheia is to strengthen the existing networks and initiatives and use the recognized potentials in the socio-spatial structure of the neighborhood to develop our proposed model. In order to operationalize this model, it is suggested to make an alliance with the strategies and programs that focus on the issue of homelessness, re-using the abandoned buildings and urban landscaping. The integration of these strategies can be supported and initiated by the public authorities in Athens municipality if the different parties recognize common goals and cooperate for their realization. The whole local food supply chain can be managed integrally by a food production cooperative and implemented by the grass-roots initiatives located in Exarcheia. Ideally, the policies that support and regulate local food supply chain can be included in the municipal and local land-use plan to secure the land tenure rights and investments in such projects.

Some small-scale, more flexible, informal and adaptive forms of urban gardening policies and programs that are also compatible with the situation of Exarcheia neighborhood are proposed in the following and depicted in Fig. 6:

- Using the semi-public open spaces in the Faculty of Architecture campus as urban gardens (see Fig. 5) and the students' workforce to hold capacity-building and awareness-raising workshops on the subject of local food supply chain and organizing programs in the Exarcheia neighborhood.
- Using the flower boxes in the pedestrian streets and flower beds in the parks for cultivation of food-stuff using the management and workforce of the citizen groups.
- Using the plazas and pedestrian streets to cultivate food-stuff and hold farmer's markets.
- Using the balconies, rooftops and inner courts of the public and private buildings for cultivating food.
- Transforming spaces in the abandoned buildings into collective kitchens and urban gardens.
- Collecting rainwater in containers or draining them to the urban gardens for watering the plants.

The Local food supply chain model in this paper is meant to be a sustainable resilience strategy for the post-austerity era in Exarcheia neighborhood of Athens. This model follows the existing trends and examples of alternative food supply in the



Fig. 5. Possible areas for cultivation inside the Faculty of Architecture campus (location indicated with a red dot in Fig. 6). Source: Own depiction

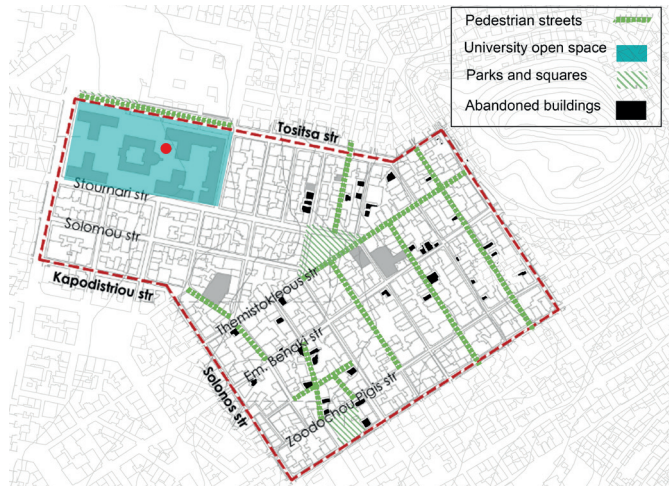


Fig. 6. Suggested public, semi-public and private spaces for interventions. Source: Own depiction based on LUH & NTUA 2018

study area. It consists of the urban gardening (where the fruits and vegetables are cultivated), the farmer's markets (where the crops are sold) and the collective kitchens for feeding the most vulnerable groups. It is a model for a self-sustaining food supply chain, in which the neighborhood meets some of its food demand by producing healthy and affordable fruits and vegetables. However, it should be noted that this alternative food supply chain model is not capable of providing enough food for the residents at this point and in such a densely built area as Exarcheia and it is not meant to be so.

Conclusions

Arguably, the most valuable byproduct of such democratic local food supply chain is advancing the social capital in the neighborhood through cooperation of the residents in the urban gardens, collective kitchens and the farmer's markets. With the regular meetings of the volunteers, who are involved in the programs such as capacity-building and awareness-raising workshops, new social bonds are created. These new social bonds between different groups of inhabitants increase peaceful co-existence of people in a neighborhood while helping them meet some of their daily needs.

Furthermore, in order to operationalize the concept of an alternative local food supply chain, an integration of strategies and policies that address problems such as homelessness, lack of urban green, abandoned buildings and spaces and lack of af-

fordable food is possible. The implementation of the proposed policies and programs for establishing a local food supply chain is highly dependent on the work of grass-roots initiatives and their organization capacity and the citizens. However, the limitation of such dependence on the volunteer groups and their organization capacity is always tied with a lot of uncertainties for their long term viability in reality and needs plenty of time and effort to adapt to the specific local context.

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